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# You can't duck the quacking

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It's not at all surprising to see General Electric lining up its ducks early for the looming battle over assessing the cost of PCB-related damage to the Hudson River.

In fact, it would be a shock if GE didn't.

After all, General Electric concedes the PCBs in the river came from its plants, while the Environmental Protection Agency has determined in a record of decision that those PCBs have created a host of damages to the river.

The dollar value attached to a broad range of damages over decades is very much up in the air, and obviously of great concern to the corporation. This natural resource damage assessment is separate from the cost of cleaning up the river.

In a recent study paid for by GE and published in Environmental Science and Technology, researchers Lawrence Barnhouse, David Glaser and John Young assert that admitted high PCB concentrations in female striped bass, their eggs and offspring seem to have had little bearing on rates of reproduction, which is contrary to what the EPA claimed in its record of decision.

The science is drawn from the enormous amounts of data on striped bass collected by the state Department of Environmental Conservation and utilities along the river, mostly between 1980 and 1997. Scientists from the EPA and, more importantly, from the three trustees drawing up the bill to present General Electric for damages have yet to digest the rationale and react.

Those trustees are the DEC, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

What's being asserted here by the GE-commissioned work is a very small duck with a modest quack. It doesn't challenge that PCBs have contaminated the food chain in the upper and lower rivers, or that striped bass were off-limits for human consumption for years because of accumulated PCB levels, or that important fish, including eels, still are off-limits.

It's solely about PCBs and the reproduction in striped bass. A random survey of interested scientists who have nothing more to look at than the findings suggest GE is likely to get a spirited argument over its conclusion. This is not an area that's been analyzed much. Further up the food chain, yes. Studies of swallows, turtles, mink and others indicate that consumption of polychlorinated biphenyls have had a negative effect on reproductive rates and produced abnormalities.

But that's all the good stuff ahead of us, the scientists bashing each other. Maybe even another \$30 million ad campaign from GE to win more hearts and minds.

A fair guess is we will see quite a flock of similar ducks to this study before we're done. Studies showing results contrary to what's already out there on the damaging influences of PCBs on various wildlife.

But mostly we'll start to see a General Electric campaign to separate what science determines is damage to fish, other wildlife and recreation, and the "damages" to users of the river caused by regulatory agencies including the DEC, state Health Department and EPA. For example, was the shutting down of recreational fishing because of

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health warnings justified by science or not? Are those shutdowns dictated by the need to protect a tiny portion of the vulnerable human population at the expense of the majority? Should GE have to pay for that damage?

It will be instructive to see who winds up in whose corner on this central debate since this already is an enormously polarized issue. There's no reason to believe that will change.

The same day this newspaper published the striped bass PCB study, we also published a report by the Friends of a Clean Hudson of who did best to promote cleanup of the river. That's from a greens perspective, keep in mind.

Gov. Pataki got an A-, while Congressman John Sweeney and GE got Ds.

D as in duck.

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